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“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,”

How a Ship having passed the Line was driven by storms to the cold Country towards the South Pole; and how from thence she made her course to the tropical Latitude of the Great Pacific Ocean; and of the strange things that befell; and in what manner the Ancyent Marinere came back to his own Country.

Summary

Three young men are walking together to a wedding, when one of them is detained by a grizzled old sailor. The young Wedding-Guest angrily demands that the Mariner let go of him, and the Mariner obeys. But the young man is transfixed by the ancient Mariner’s “glittering eye” and can do nothing but sit on a stone and listen to his strange tale. The Mariner says that he sailed on a ship out of his native harbor—“below the kirk, below the hill, / Below the lighthouse top”—and into a sunny and cheerful sea. Hearing bassoon music drifting from the direction of the wedding, the Wedding-Guest imagines that the bride has entered the hall, but he is still helpless to tear himself from the Mariner’s story. The Mariner recalls that the voyage quickly darkened, as a giant storm rose up in the sea and chased the ship southward. Quickly, the ship came to a frigid land “of mist and snow,” where “ice, mast-high, came floating by”; the ship was hemmed inside this maze of ice. But then the sailors encountered an Albatross, a great sea bird. As it flew around the ship, the ice cracked and split, and a wind from the south propelled the ship out of the frigid regions, into a foggy stretch of water. The Albatross followed behind it, a symbol of good luck to the sailors. A pained look crosses the Mariner’s face, and the Wedding-Guest asks him, “Why look’st thou so?” The Mariner confesses that he shot and killed the Albatross with his crossbow.

At first, the other sailors were furious with the Mariner for having killed the bird that made the breezes blow. But when the fog lifted soon afterward, the sailors decided that the bird had actually brought not the breezes but the fog; they now congratulated the Mariner on his deed. The wind pushed the ship into a silent sea where the sailors were quickly stranded; the winds died down, and the ship was “As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean.” The ocean thickened, and the men had no water to drink; as if the sea were rotting, slimy creatures crawled out of it and walked across the surface. At night, the water burned green, blue, and white with death fire. Some of the sailors dreamed that a spirit, nine fathoms deep, followed them beneath

the ship from the land of mist and snow. The sailors blamed the Mariner for their plight and hung the corpse of the Albatross around his neck like a cross.

A weary time passed; the sailors became so parched, their mouths so dry, that they were unable to speak. But one day, gazing westward, the Mariner saw a tiny speck on the horizon. It resolved into a ship, moving toward them. Too dry-mouthed to speak out and inform the other sailors, the Mariner bit down on his arm; sucking the blood, he was able to moisten his tongue enough to cry out, "A sail! a sail!" The sailors smiled, believing they were saved. But as the ship neared, they saw that it was a ghostly, skeletal hull of a ship and that its crew included two figures: Death and the Night-mare Life-in-Death, who takes the form of a pale woman with golden locks and red lips, and "thicks man's blood with cold." Death and Life-in-Death began to throw dice, and the woman won, whereupon she whistled three times, causing the sun to sink to the horizon, the stars to instantly emerge. As the moon rose, chased by a single star, the sailors dropped dead one by one—all except the Mariner, whom each sailor cursed "with his eye" before dying. The souls of the dead men leapt from their bodies and rushed by the Mariner.

The Wedding-Guest declares that he fears the Mariner, with his glittering eye and his skinny hand. The Mariner reassures the Wedding-Guest that there is no need for dread; he was not among the men who died, and he is a living man, not a ghost. Alone on the ship, surrounded by two hundred corpses, the Mariner was surrounded by the slimy sea and the slimy creatures that crawled across its surface. He tried to pray but was deterred by a "wicked whisper" that made his heart "as dry as dust." He closed his eyes, unable to bear the sight of the dead men, each of who glared at him with the malice of their final curse. For seven days and seven nights the Mariner endured the sight, and yet he was unable to die. At last the moon rose, casting the great shadow of the ship across the waters; where the ship's shadow touched the waters, they burned red. The great water snakes moved through the silvery moonlight, glittering; blue, green, and black, the snakes coiled and swam and became beautiful in the Mariner's eyes. He blessed the beautiful creatures in his heart; at that moment, he found himself able to pray, and the corpse of the Albatross fell from his neck, sinking "like lead into the sea."

But the explanatory notes complicate, rather than clarify, the poem as a whole; while there are times that they explain some unarticulated action, there are also times that they interpret the material of the poem in a way that seems at odds with, or irrelevant to, the poem itself. For instance, in Part II, we find a note regarding the spirit that followed the ship nine fathoms deep: "one of the invisible inhabitants of this planet, neither departed souls nor angels; concerning whom the learned Jew, Josephus, and the Platonic Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus, may be consulted." What might Coleridge mean by introducing such figures as "the Platonic Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus," into the poem, as marginalia, and by implying that the verse itself should be interpreted through him?

This is a question that has puzzled scholars since the first publication of the poem in this form. (Interestingly, the original version of the "Rime," in the 1797 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, did not include the side notes.) There is certainly an element of humor in Coleridge's scholarly glosses—a bit of parody aimed at the writers of serious glosses of this type; such phrases as "Platonic Constantinopolitan" seem consciously silly. It can be argued that the glosses are simply

an amusing irrelevancy designed to make the poem seem archaic and that the truly important text is the poem itself—in its complicated, often Christian symbolism, in its moral lesson (that “all creatures great and small” were created by God and should be loved, from the Albatross to the slimy snakes in the rotting ocean) and in its characters.

If one accepts this argument, one is faced with the task of discovering the key to Coleridge’s symbolism: what does the Albatross represent, what do the spirits represent, and so forth. Critics have made many ingenious attempts to do just that and have found in the “Rime” a number of interesting readings, ranging from Christian parable to political allegory. But these interpretations are dampened by the fact that none of them (with the possible exception of the Christian reading, much of which is certainly intended by the poem) seems essential to the story itself. One can accept these interpretations of the poem only if one disregards the glosses almost completely.

A more interesting, though still questionable, reading of the poem maintains that Coleridge intended it as a commentary on the ways in which people interpret the lessons of the past and the ways in which the past is, to a large extent, simply unknowable. By filling his archaic ballad with elaborate symbolism that cannot be deciphered in any single, definitive way and then framing that symbolism with side notes that pick at it and offer a highly theoretical spiritual-scientific interpretation of its classifications, Coleridge creates tension between the ambiguous poem and the unambiguous-but-ridiculous notes, exposing a gulf between the “old” poem and the “new” attempt to understand it. The message would be that, though certain moral lessons from the past are still comprehensible—“he liveth best who loveth best” is not hard to understand—other aspects of its narratives are less easily grasped.

In any event, this first segment of the poem takes the Mariner through the worst of his trials and shows, in action, the lesson that will be explicitly articulated in the second segment. The Mariner kills the Albatross in bad faith, subjecting himself to the hostility of the forces that govern the universe (the very un-Christian-seeming spirit beneath the sea and the horrible Life-in-Death). It is unclear how these forces are meant to relate to one another—whether the Life-in-Death is in league with the submerged spirit or whether their simultaneous appearance is simply a coincidence.

After earning his curse, the Mariner is able to gain access to the favor of God—able to regain his ability to pray—only by realizing that the monsters around him are beautiful in God’s eyes and that he should love them as he should have loved the Albatross. In the final three books of the poem, the Mariner’s encounter with a Hermit will spell out this message explicitly, and the reader will learn why the Mariner has stopped the Wedding-Guest to tell him this story.

Was the ‘ancient mariner’ real?

The ancient mariner didn’t exist but it’s likely that Coleridge was inspired by a conversation with fellow poet William Wordsworth, who had recently read George Shelvocke’s *A Voyage Round the World*. Shelvocke writes of an incident when his second in command shot an albatross, which had been following the ship for several days. The ship, called the *Speedwell*, was later lost at Juan Fernandez Island.

Others say the poem was inspired by a dream that Coleridge's friend, George Cruikshank had after reading Thomas James's *Strange and Dangerous Voyage*. This account refers to an old man who had been shipwrecked and survives thanks to angels piloting the ship. There's also a theory that the old man who speaks at the start of the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* may have been Fletcher Christian who led the mutiny onboard the HMS *Bounty* in 1789. Coleridge would have been aware of the rumours that Christian had faked his own death and returned to England – therefore the old man of the poem could well have been inspired by Christian.

What do "Death" and "Life-in-Death" stand for in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"?

Death and Life-in-Death are allegorical figures who represent the potential fates of the men on board the ship. Death represents the straightforward physical termination of life, while Life-in-Death represents spiritual death

What does the albatross symbolize in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"?

The albatross is symbolic of a few things. As a living bird, the albatross is symbolic of innocence, goodness, God's creation, and even God's love and salvation. In stanza 16 of part 1, the sailors and readers are introduced to the albatross. The albatross symbolizes ideas such as the guilt of the mariner, the natural world, and God's creation.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner by Samuel Taylor Coleridge



Symbolism in the poem:

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was an English Poet of the Romantic Movement, best recognized for “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”. In this poem, Coleridge uses symbolic dialect to prompt his own religious thoughts and deep religious realities to the readers. The poem defines the life of an Ancient Mariner, who had committed a sin by murdering a sea bird, Albatross, which is considered to be a symbol of good luck. The Albatross hung around the Mariner’s neck as a curse for the wickedness which he had committed. It fell from his neck, when he regrets for his sin and prays for mercy. The passage is a figurative representation of the Mariner’s life, his route towards sin and his ensuing remorse.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s use of symbolism in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* lends the work to adults as a complex web of representation, rather than a simple story about a sailor. The author uses the story of a sailor and his adventures to reveal aspects of life. This tale follows the Mariner and his crew as they travel between the equator and the South Pole, and then back to England. Without the symbols, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* would be simply a poem about an old mariner who is telling a story about killing a bird to a guest at a wedding. Of course, anyone who reads the poem can see that there is more to it than just a simple telling of a story.

Religious symbolism is an art, which supports the writers to express the collective message of a faith by using symbols in their writings. Coleridge in his honest narrative poem “*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*” uses the symbolic depiction of the Christian religion to educate the

readers, the moral laws of God. It gives the readers the multifaceted messages by its rich imagery. It is not a direct religious homily. But there are many symbols of the biblical understandings such as sin, punishment and regret, which can be seen through the poem. Coleridge shelters a large part of this poem on the root of sin.

“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is an extremely symbolic poem, written in the form of a ballad, dealing with certain emotional state of a sailor, his sin, and redemption. Yet, the poem involves an irony, for the wedding ceremony represents the start of a new life of the two joint souls, but the Mariner has grasped the end of his life when nothing remains for him except the past remembrances of sorrow, sin, and repentance. If the Mariner’s journey is regarded as a symbolic journey of life, we see that he also started it happily like the newlyweds. The storm at sea sends the ship to the land of mist. The ‘mist’ symbolizes moral confusion which the Mariner and other sailors were suffering. Some critics have described the bird itself as Jesus Christ. Therefore, the slaughter of the bird by the Mariner signifies the sin of crucifixion, permitting the bird to hold the death of a martyr, though his act of murder, the Mariner has become a sinner, appealing the inevitable sorrows of life.

The poem initiates, as the Mariner stops a wedding guest with his commanding glittering eyes and makes him listen to a story in which he slays an Albatross during a voyage he makes with other sailors in the sea. The voyage is a symbolic image of Mariner’s life and his path to sin. Albatross here symbolically refers to Christ. In Christianity, Christ was directed by God to save mankind. The same thing transpires here as the Albatross was sent to save the ship. Nevertheless, the Ancient Mariner kills the Albatross with his cross and bow and so, he abolishes the belief of Christians.

Coleridge discovers the poem with deep religious views. He discloses to the readers that the Mariner, who slays the bird, which is a symbol of a good sign is now feeling guilty and cursed. Obliviousness and pride lead the Mariner to commit the sin. He wants forgiveness for the sin, which he has committed. On or after here we can comprehend the religious belief of Christians that God should punish everyone who commits a sin and should forgive those who repent for their past sin. A sinner has the guilt or weight on his soul for the erroneous deed he did. The Ancient Mariner and the ship have been cursed due to the offense of the Mariner. As a chastisement for his act, the sailors hung the lifeless Albatross around his neck. The ocean becomes denser and the sailor’s lips are dry by heat and dehydration. The curse plagues everyone in the ship.

At that time, a ship came there with two mystical beings. One is Death and the additional is Life-in-Death. The Mariner has two choices, whether to live or to die. Life-in-Death symbolically refers to punishment. Death deceives the sailors in its trap and all of them die. Life-in-Death win the Mariner as it specifies the punishment that he must undergo penance throughout his life and he must pursue people to tell his story, except his soul will plague him until he delivers the story. He feels remorseful and carries the burden on his soul for the offense that he committed. He wants to seek refuge from God and try to implore. But he is prohibited by a wicked whisper. At last, the Moon rises, shimmering the shadow of the ship across the sea. The sea snakes move at will in the sea and the Mariner’s heart is filled with full love and indebtedness for them. He blesses the stunning creatures. At that minute, the Mariner finds

himself praying, and the lifeless Albatross fell from his neck and sank into the sea. From this act, Coleridge states that God has created every creature in this world and we must love them all.

The Albatross symbolizes many things in Coleridge's poem. In maritime lore these birds were seen by sailors both as a sign of good luck and as bad luck. Sailors often thought the albatross carried the spirits of dead sailors that would shield the ship or bring good winds, but just as frequently they thought the bird to be a death sign, a sign that a sailor would soon perish. It is this differed belief in what the albatross represents that roots the crewmen to be livid with the Mariner, then be pleased that he killed it.

The Albatross signifies the sublime. It is an ordinary creature with a mystical. It associates the two worlds since its death is the provoking event that sets the Mariner on his route to both Romantic enlightenment and hopeful absolution (Morris, 2005). Since the Mariner did not appreciate the Albatross, he was disciplined by being incapable to connect to the spiritual world through prayer. When he finally distinguishes the power and beauty of the sublime in the form of the sea snakes, the Mariner regains the power of prayer and the Albatross drops from around his neck to sink into the sea.

The Sun and Moon are symbols for the forces contrasting in the Mariner's voyage. The Sun and Moon clash, the symbols of the mystical and the real world. When the Mariner and his men are in distress after he has shot the Albatross, the images are completely of the Sun and sunlight. The men fear deadly conditions such as heat, thirst, and famine (Bentley, 2007). The Sun is a part of the natural world, something breathtaking and terrifying, an instance of the sublime. When Life-in-Death's mystery ship appears, the imageries related with that scene are complete with mentions of the Sun.

The Moon is often linked with the mystical and the mysterious bond between it and the sea. The Moon controls the tides, and its impact helps the Mariner get back home. When the Mariner's punishment really begins, the Moon has risen and the language changes from severe imagery to almost comforting passages. When the Mariner faints and hears the two voices, one makes mention of the Moon looking down on him, almost like it is observing out for the Mariner as it helps to lead him home. He reaches the harbor underneath the shadow of the Moon, appropriate since the voyage began under the light of the Sun. The sequence is complete.

If the Sun shows what is apparent, the Moon shows what is unseen. The Sun and the Moon are contrasting forces, but they must cohabit. They rise and fall in a daily cycle, in accord if not inevitably in congruence. The Mariner's cycle of sin and penance reflect this cycle as well.

In conclusion, Coleridge writes this poem as an intermediate to express his own religious views and the fundamental religious truths. He uses the Sun and the Moon as an important symbol in this poem. The Sun specifies the wrath of God as most of the predicaments happens to the Mariner during the day. While the Moon represents the quality of compassion, as the mariner free from his curse and return home during the company of moonlight. Therefore, the poem with its ironic symbolism carries an collective message that whoever disobeys God's law will be punished and those who show remorse and repent for his sins will be forgiven by God .

It is to be noted that Coleridge's constantly use of bright and somber, colors of silence and noise of pleasure and grief of light and gloom etc. symbolizes his own interpretation of light which is a combination of the opposite. With the engagement of all these symbols, the lyricist has given a new sense to the epitome pattern of the main fall and his remorse, leading to limited redemption

Lastly, the mariner knows that unless he recreates his experience through the reiterating of his tale, he is at jeopardy of returning to his cold, callous state. The frost over one's heart and soul forms speedily and inaudibly. It is only by revealing the darker areas of one's memory to the light that one can avoid the freezing over of emotions.